Fusion center draws law-enforcement agencies closer
By Michael Martz, Richmond Times-Dispatch

The call came from an intelligence fusion center in Illinois to Virginia's fusion center in Chesterfield County.

Police at the University of Illinois had identified a Virginia resident who had been cyber-stalking two students and threatening to carry out a campus massacre similar to what occurred in 2007 at Virginia Tech. The suspect said by e-mail that he was on his way to the university on Jan. 12, 2008.

The Virginia Fusion Center, housed in Virginia State Police headquarters on Midlothian Turnpike, used the information to find out what kind of car the suspect was driving and to determine that he had no record of firearms purchases in the state. They soon found him through local law enforcement in Southwest Virginia, where he was being held on a mental-health warrant, Virginia State Police said.

The situation might not have been terrorism-related, but information about it was shared by the intelligence network assembled after the Sept. 11 attacks. The network has made sharing of critical information the rule, not the exception, in criminal investigations and emergencies.

"We created a fusion center to share, to make it impossible not to share," said Capt. Steven W. Lambert, commander of the state police's Criminal Intelligence Division, which runs the center.

The result is a working relationship among federal, state and local law-enforcement agencies -- as well as fusion centers across the country -- that local emergency officials say they have never seen before.

"We've got situational access that we didn't have before," said Curt M. Nellis, deputy emergency management coordinator in Chesterfield. "That makes our job a lot easier when we're aware of what the threat is we have to handle."

The Virginia center opened in December 2005, although it was already in operation as a "virtual" information-sharing network through law-enforcement and other agencies. It's not virtual anymore. The center physically houses representatives of the FBI and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, as well as state police, the Virginia Department of Emergency Management, the Virginia National Guard and the state Department of Fire Programs. Personnel also work closely with private institutions, such as Dominion Virginia Power, that own sensitive systems critical to public safety.

The center has struggled with funding, as federal homeland-security grants have dwindled and 80 percent of available money has been reserved for localities. But the operation, with 28 full-time state positions, has delivered on the promises made to improve intelligence-sharing after terrorists struck the Pentagon in Arlington County and the World Trade Center in New York eight years ago. State police also have representatives on every joint terrorism task force in the state and included an intelligence officer in every field office in the state.

"The exchange of information is better, there's no question about it," said state police Superintendent W. Steven Flaherty.

One reason is the creation of the Department of Homeland Security in 2003, said retired Maj. Gen. Bruce M. Lawlor, who helped create the agency while at the White House under President George W. Bush.

"If you look at the information environment on September 11th and the information environment today, it's night and day," said Lawlor, now director of Virginia Tech's Center for Technology, Security and Policy. "The department is largely responsible for that."

The information the center handles isn't always about potential terrorist threats. Sometimes, the center is used for tips on illegal drugs and other criminal operations. Last year, for example, the center played a role in intercepting a shipment of illegal drugs from Texas to Northern Virginia, as well as finding a suspect and victim in a child-pornography case.

And the system also works among the states. This year, for example, the center was alerted by the Florida attorney general's office that a threat had been made against NFL quarterback Michael Vick, who was released from prison after serving 18 months for running a dogfighting ring in Surry County. The woman who made the threat had moved from eastern Virginia to Texas, where law-enforcement officials tracked her down. It didn't take long to determine that the threat wasn't credible.

"She was scared to death," Lambert said. "She was a huge Dallas [Cowboys] fan. . . . She didn't think she would get in trouble saying that."

Meanwhile, the fusion center played a role this month in distributing a warning by the FBI that terrorists might be plotting to attack stadiums, hotels, and entertainment complexes. The bulletins didn't cite specific threats but came during an investigation of possible bomb plots in New York and Denver.

Lambert confirmed that the center also had received information that the Marine Corps base at Quantico had been among the potential targets of an alleged terrorist ring in North Carolina.

"There are a number of plots that have been uncovered as possible risks," Lambert said Friday. "We are grateful we were able to get ahead of them. They were very serious threats."

State Fair's new home also will be emergency shelter
By Michael Martz, RTD

The State Fair of Virginia's new home in Caroline County will serve as an emergency shelter in a catastrophe, such as a hurricane or terrorist attack requiring a mass evacuation.

The designation is part of a 20-year agreement signed two years ago in exchange for a one-time state appropriation of almost $2.4 million to help build the main exhibition hall at The Meadow Event Park.

"It was a win-win," said Robert P. Crouch Jr., assistant to the governor for commonwealth preparedness, who helped broker the deal between the State Fair of Virginia Inc. and the Virginia Department of Emergency Management in December 2007.

The fair is scheduled to open Sept. 24 in its new location, an $81 million facility at the former Meadow Farm, a 360-acre estate within a mile of Interstate 95 in southern Caroline.

However, the two-week fair will have to live with the potential threat of an emergency -- a terrorist attack in Northern Virginia or a big hurricane in Hampton Roads, for example -- that would require the site to house thousands of people evacuated out of harm's way, as well as their household pets.

"That is a possibility, but I think very remote," said Curry Roberts, president of the State Fair. "If it was something that catastrophic, we're obviously going to cooperate with the commonwealth."

The agreement arose from a meeting between Roberts, a former secretary of economic development under Gov. Gerald L. Baliles, and William H. Leighty, then-chief of staff to **Gov. Timothy M. Kaine.**

Leighty, who retired two years ago after 29 years in state government, had served as a volunteer administrator on the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina devastated the region in 2005.

He said he immediately saw the potential for using the site in the same way he had seen fairgrounds in Louisiana used to house evacuees from New Orleans and other stricken areas.

"I said, 'That is the floor plan for the emergency center we just built in Baton Rouge,'" Leighty recalled last week.

Katrina changed the way state and local officials prepare for hurricanes and other disasters. "We learned from Katrina that you need everything, particularly if it's that bad," Leighty said.

In Virginia, emergency managers in Richmond, Norfolk and other localities led the way in trying to negotiate arrangements for potentially thousands of people who would need inland shelter and services if a big storm struck the coast.

Initially, Richmond proposed a plan to use the fair's old home, the Richmond Raceway Complex in Henrico County, and Kings Dominion in Doswell as staging areas for evacuees who would be diverted to emergency shelters in the city.

The proposal died because of opposition from Henrico and the amusement park, but Richmond struck a different deal in 2007 to use St. Paul's Baptist Church in eastern Henrico as a staging area for people evacuated from Norfolk.

The state ultimately took the lead in designating public buildings around Virginia as emergency shelters, as well as securing the new fairgrounds as a central shelter and staging area. Crouch said the state has identified shelters statewide with a total capacity of 20,000 beds.

"I'm just glad it got done," said Benjamin W. Johnson, former emergency-management coordinator in Richmond.

The centerpiece of the Meadow Farm complex is the Farm Bureau Center, a 75,000-square-foot building with about 64,000 square feet of open exhibition space that could house almost 1,500 people. The state appropriation, part of the general fund in the 2007 budget, helped pay for the $10 million building, Roberts said.

The memorandum of understanding with the state requires the building to have a kitchen capable of preparing up to 6,500 meals a day and restrooms that could handle up to 2,200 people.

The building also has to be wired to accommodate a generator for backup power, and be built to withstand winds up to 90 mph and snow loads of up to 20 pounds per square foot.

The agreement also includes two paved pads, each about 20,000 square feet, that could be used for tents or other temporary structures to shelter household pets. State officials say they are working on an updated agreement for animal sheltering.

Finally, the park has about 10 acres of parking that could be used for staging emergency-response operations, Roberts said.

"As a citizen, I'm glad the agreement exists," Roberts said, "but I hope they never have to use it."

Va. improves emergency communication in years after 9/11

By Michael Martz, Richmond Times-Dispatch

Eight years after staring into the smoking inferno of the Pentagon, Virginia State Police Superintendent W. Steven Flaherty still is trying to solve one of the biggest problems faced that day -- rescuers who couldn't talk to one another.

At the Pentagon in Arlington County and the World Trade Center in New York City, heroic efforts were made by firefighters, police and rescue workers who weren't always able to communicate because they used different radio systems.

Arlington firefighters lent one of their radios to firefighters from Washington so they could talk while fighting the blaze caused when an airliner was crashed by terrorists into the heart of America's military establishment.

Solving that communications problem -- called "interoperability" in the emergency-management world -- has been one of Virginia's biggest success stories since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, as well as one of the state's biggest continuing challenges.

While Virginia was first among the states to adopt a strategic plan to address the problem, the state still is struggling to finish a radio system that state police and 20 other state agencies will use to talk to one another and, eventually, local first responders.

"It is a police officer safety issue," Flaherty said of problems that have plagued the Statewide Agencies Radio System, or STARS, a five-year, $360 million project that is 15 months behind schedule and struggling to remain within its budget.

The problems have included laptop computers that shut off at high speed because of interference from the electronic fuel system in troopers' new vehicles; digital radios that turned talk to robotic gibberish when signals weakened; and delays in building microwave towers necessary to make the new system work.

At one point, state police ordered Motorola Corp., which had gotten the primary contract, to stop installing radios in patrol cars.

"Clearly, the troopers were skeptical," said Col. Wayne M. Huggins, executive director of the Virginia State Police Association and a former state police superintendent, who led a commission created by then-Gov. Jim Gilmore to examine the state's preparedness after the 2001 attacks.

A new statewide radio system was a top priority of the commission, though an inflated $600 million price tag made it a tough sell.

The state is confident it has overcome most of the problems with the new system, which now is operating in the Richmond and Hampton Roads regions.

Fourteen localities in central Virginia and 32 statewide also are able to connect to the system through COMLINC, an Internet-based technology that allows different radio systems to talk to one another.

The state auditor of public accounts is preparing an audit of the system for release this fall to follow up on concerns his office raised this year about the system's reliability, completion schedule and cost, which is financed with revenue bonds backed by a tax on rental vehicles.

"They're in the process of renegotiating and resizing part of the contract" with Motorola, state Auditor of Public Accounts Walter J. Kucharski said.

. . .

Local police also continue to struggle with the emergency-communications challenge in some parts of the state, such as the Blacksburg area, where a different kind of terrorist struck on April 16, 2007, in the deadliest shooting in modern U.S. history.

When student Seung-Hui Cho killed 32 students at Virginia Tech and then himself, police and other rescuers confronted some of the same problems faced at the Pentagon and World Trade Center.

"Frustrating communications issues and barriers occurred during the incident," said a panel appointed by **Gov. Timothy M. Kaine** to investigate the massacre. "Every service operated on different radio frequencies, making dispatch, interagency and medical communications difficult."

The panel, led by another former state police superintendent, W. Gerald Massengill, concluded: "Local political entities must get past their inability to reach consensus and assure interoperability of their communications systems."

It hasn't happened yet in Blacksburg, where town police and Virginia Tech police continue to communicate on different emergency radio bands.

But the police departments are able to patch through communications with each other in an emergency. And the town and university are part of a pair of major efforts to consolidate emergency 911 dispatch centers in the region and eventually create a common radio band for all the localities, including Montgomery County, Christiansburg and possibly Radford, as well as Radford University.

"It's not cheap . . . but in the long run, you'll save money in each locality by not buying six sets of equipment," said Lt. D.J. Davis in the police services division of the Blacksburg Police Department.

Improving the interoperability of emergency communications has been a top priority of Virginia since the Sept. 11 attacks. Emergency communications have accounted for about one-third of $268 million in federal homeland-security grants the state has received since 2003. (That total does not include about $330 million spent in Northern Virginia and the rest of the Washington region, or spending on bioterrorism and hospital readiness.)

Virginia set up an oversight system to coordinate grants to local governments for buying emergency communications equipment. The state hired an interoperability coordinator, Christopher Essid, who since has become director of emergency communications for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Virginia also created a State Interoperability Executive Committee to award grants that ensure localities buy equipment that is compatible, if not identical.

"We are confident that Virginia has been and remains a leader in expanding communications interoperability," said Robert P. Crouch Jr., assistant to the governor for commonwealth preparedness. "That does not mean we are all the way there."

. . .

One of the remaining challenges is improving communications between colleges and the localities around them.

"In Virginia, there is an identified gap in interoperability between local first-responder communications systems and college and university systems across the commonwealth," said Constance McGeorge, the state's interoperability coordinator.

One reason for the gap is that colleges and universities haven't been eligible for homeland-security grants, except for two years when state officials were able to divert a small amount of money to public institutions.

"That's tough to get," said University of Richmond Police Chief Robert Dillard. "That money is not trickling down to us."

But Dillard's police force is tied into the emergency communication systems for Henrico County and Richmond, which both dispatched officers to the campus last year when a young man with a pellet gun and an odd disguise prompted a four-hour campus lockdown.

Similarly, Virginia Commonwealth University is part of the city's emergency communications system, and Virginia Union University is scheduled to be added soon. Chesterfield County has direct communications with police at Virginia State University in Ettrick.

Localities in the Richmond area have used homeland-security grants to bolster their communication systems. Hanover County, for example, used to be unable to communicate with police, fire and rescue crews in some other localities, but now the county has an 800-megahertz system that Chesterfield's deputy director of emergency management, Curt M. Nellis, called "the latest and greatest" technology.

The view is much the same in Hampton Roads, where Norfolk Emergency Management Coordinator Ron Keys said all localities, as well as Old Dominion and Norfolk State universities, are able to communicate in emergencies. "We are light years ahead of where we were," he said.

And in Charlottesville, the University of Virginia is part of the same emergency plan and communications system as the city and Albemarle County. "That's total interoperability for 25 public-safety agencies over 788 square miles," Charlottesville Fire Chief Charles Werner said.

Aside from buying equipment, however, local fire chiefs and emergency officials say the biggest change has been in the culture of local public-safety agencies.

"We needed to talk to each other and change the way we do business," Werner said. "For decades, it was 'I have my radio system and you have yours' and never shall they meet."

As a result, homeland-security initiatives have forced local officials to represent a regional interest and not just their own, Nellis said in Chesterfield. "Regional collaboration is strong and healthy in central Virginia."